

Poverty simulation shows plight of low-income families

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About 18 percent of Delray Beach residents are living below the poverty line, which is higher than the national average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. To give community leaders, educators and business people an idea of what it's like to live on less than \$23,000 a year, Palm Beach County Services Department and Palm Healthcare Foundation's Healthier Delray Beach had a poverty simulation experience Feb. 24 at Achievement Centers for Children & Families.

Each participant was given a folder with a new persona inside such as Jessica, a 33-year-old convicted felon in recovery for heroin addiction and the mother of an 11-year-old special needs son and an infant daughter. As that character, the participant then went through a series of daily challenges a person in that position would be



FINDING A WAY TO COPE Feline Mesidort, neighborhood services administrator for the city of Delray Beach, discusses the simulated day with her makeshift "family" during the Cost of Poverty Experience simulation. MARIA LORENZINO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

facing such as transportation, housing and health care. They had to balance those issues alongside being a parent, recovering addict and the struggle to find a job with lack of education and a criminal record.

Staffed with volunteers at each station, those portraying Jessica and other

characters were tempted to partake in illegal activity by a wandering drug dealer and taken to a mock jail if they broke the law while trying to survive. When times got really tough, participants had the option of pawning their possessions at a

mock pawn shop.

Michael Dieurestil, program manager at Village Academy in Delray Beach, had to play the role of Jessica's special needs son Isaiah. There were times when he had to go

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without his necessary medication because they couldn't afford it and his mother had to pawn their television and his Xbox to buy diapers for his baby sister.

"This was my first time doing anything like this. My mom and dad came from Haiti but they worked multiple jobs and managed without government assistance," said Dieurestil, who is one of three children and has a master's degree from Keiser University in business administration. "There are so many people in need and a lot of people who will never see the struggle or the other side of reality."

For Dante Ferrell, the exercise wasn't far from his own childhood experience.

"I grew up hustling so some of this was very familiar to me," he said. "We didn't always have money for food or money to pay the electric bill. We all had to do whatever we could to make it through the week and survive."

Lauren Zuchman, project director for Healthier Delray Beach, said she is hoping to shed light on poverty stat-

istics in Delray Beach.

"Our priority neighborhoods in Delray are west of Swinton and just east of Congress," she said. "In Delray Beach, 78.82 percent of all children and 62.73 percent of all individuals are living in households at 200 percent below the poverty level."

Arts Garage's CEO Marjorie Waldo participated in the exercise and plans to bring an extension of it to the entertainment venue, inviting school principals and City Commissioners to be a part.

Banyan Creek Elementary School Principal Allison Castellano said she wants to share the exercise with her staff.

"It would be great to incorporate something like this into the Chamber of Commerce," said Delray Beach-based commercial insurance agent Connor Lynch. "A lot of people would benefit from experiencing this."

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